

13 must-see ancient Sichuan counties



For backpackers who like to dive into "ancient counties" rich with centuries-old style, Sichuan is a gold mine. May's and subsequent earthquakes have ruined many, but a lucky few remain.

Five months have passed, and *Beijing Today* picked out 13 counties, each of which has a unique face. These counties are listed in alphabetical order. A map on the center page marks their location.

Earthquakes taught people a lesson: one never knows when he will lose something or somebody. So don't wait! Go while they are still there.

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Dege

Storehouse of Tibetan culture

By Huang Daohen

This is the heart of Tibetan culture. If you want to get to the source of Tibetan religion, you must visit Lhasa and places like the Potala Palace. But Dege is the very heart of the culture, said Se Jia, director of the printing house in Dege, a remote town in western Sichuan Province.

History

Land of Mercy

Resting in a valley on the upper reaches of the Jinsha and Yalong rivers and bordering Tibet, Dege with only 61,000 residents is the westernmost city in Sichuan. It lies before a rugged mountain trail that heads up to the vast Tibetan highland, the least-explored regions of China.

Dege was named after the Dege clan, which means "land of mercy" in Tibetan. Historically, Dege was one of three ancient centers of Tibetan Buddhism culture, together with Lhasa in Tibet and Xiahe in Gansu. Dege is of great historic significance as the birthplace of the Khampa culture, the hometown of Gesar King and an important stop along the ancient Tea-Horse Road.

Custom

Carving blueprints and printing Buddhist

You might be wondering how and where these blueprinting boards are made. Well, you can check it out right across the street from the printing house. Carving blueprints and printing Buddhist texts are a tradition in this remote town.

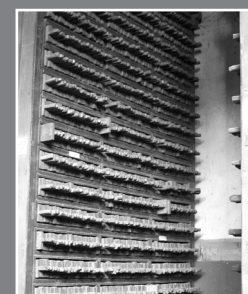
Every day, the men of the town do carvings on the board, which serves as the blueprint for future printings. The carvers first write the mirror image of the words onto the boards and then slowly carve out the inscriptions with a number of tools.

The wedges are very deep, so they can last throughout time. Back in the old days, to encourage people to make deep wedges, the carvers would get paid based on how deep the wedges were.

When the board was finished, a layer of gold dust was spread on the surface and whatever fell into the wedges became the carver's property.

This is not as easy job as one must apply much pressure to achieve deep grooves in the wood.

On the streets of Dege, you can find Tibetans going about their daily routines, wearing local attire and accessories, available on the roadside.



The wooden prints used for printing the Buddhist scriptures.

Photos by Flickr.com

Getting there and back

A rickety bus runs between Garze and Dege daily for 60 yuan. The 216 kilometers takes around eight hours. Chartering a van from Garze to Dege costs around 300 yuan. More comfortable buses depart from Kangding to Dege every 2 days, stopping overnight at Luhuo, the cost is 130-169 yuan, 24 hours.

For departing, there is a daily bus from Dege eastward to Kangding, stopping at Manigango, Garze and Luhuo.

No special permits are required, only fortitude and patience.

Accommodation

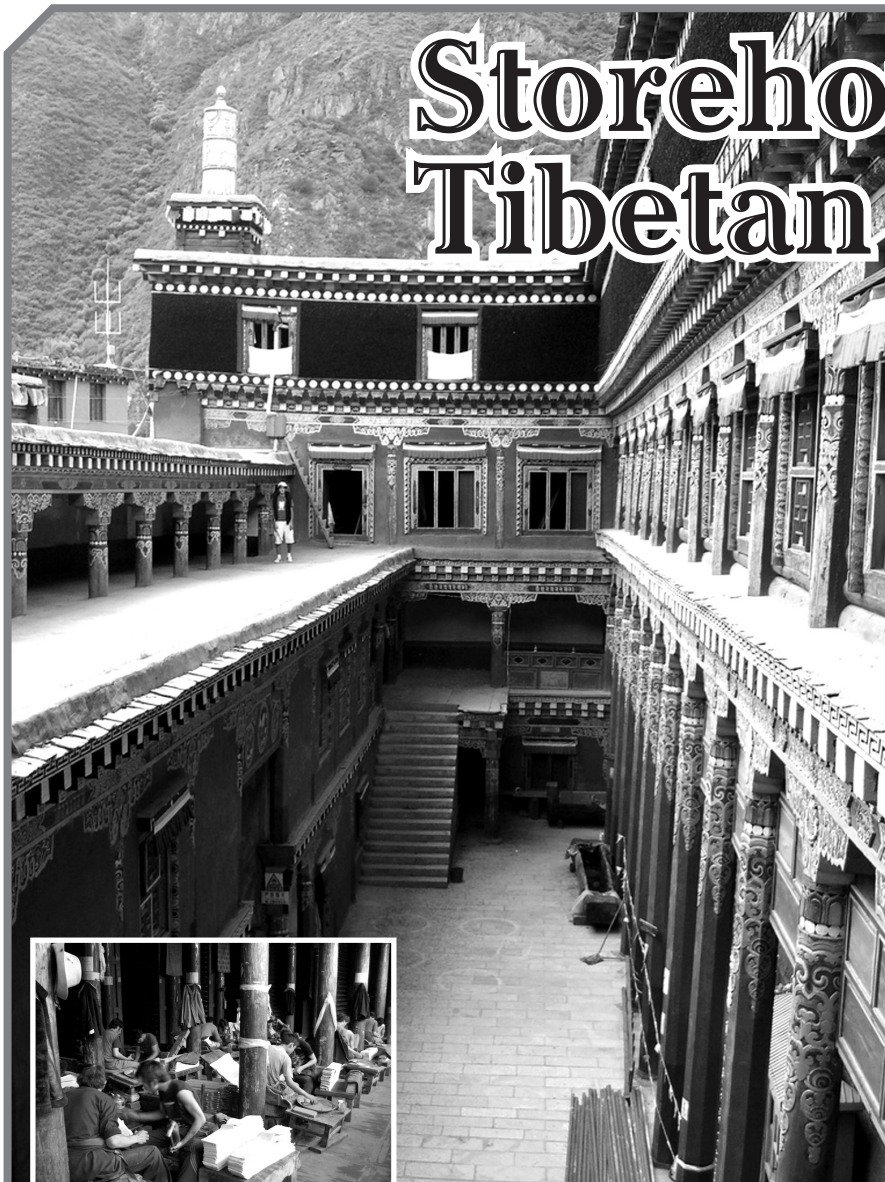
Dege Binguan: 10-15 yuan/dorm, 180 yuan/standard building

Wuzi Reception Hotel: just opposite the bus station, 20 yuan/dorm.

Dexi Hostel: 8-15 yuan/dorm

Food

Plenty of small restaurants are found downtown. Some places offer skewered vegetables and kebabs which are barbecued using lots of spices. There are a couple of bakeries selling Baba-Bread and dumplings on the road leading to the monastery.



A place to print scriptures.

Architecture

Scripture printing house

In Dege, perhaps the most famous sight is the Scripture Printing House built in 1729. Locals walk around the building innumerable times each day. It marks the beginning of the day as religion is molded into every aspect of their lives.

The massive printing house is open to visitors. "About 80 percent of the Tibetan literary culture is stored here in this complex," Se Jia, the director of the printing house, said. Inside the dark halls are the engraving blocks, which serve as the blueprints for the printings.

There are two legends about the site. One is that one day at sunset when Denba Tsering, a ruler, heard some boys chanting outside his

house he decided he should print some books for them to read. Another is that a man, while transporting printing plates on the back of a yak, had his load spilled to the ground. The printing house was built on spot where these events took place.

The main building is a four-story complex with more than 30 rooms. Upstairs is where the printing is actually done. The workers work quickly and almost mechanically.

The printers use black and red ink to print two types of scriptures. The red inks they use to print are made of a medicinal herb with low toxicity. The paper repels mice and moths, and keeps them from damaging the books.

Sights

Following in King Gesar's footsteps

In Tibetan, Dege means a kind area. It is full of cultural relics that legends attribute to King Gesar, the eldest of the 15 sons of Heavenly King Baifan.

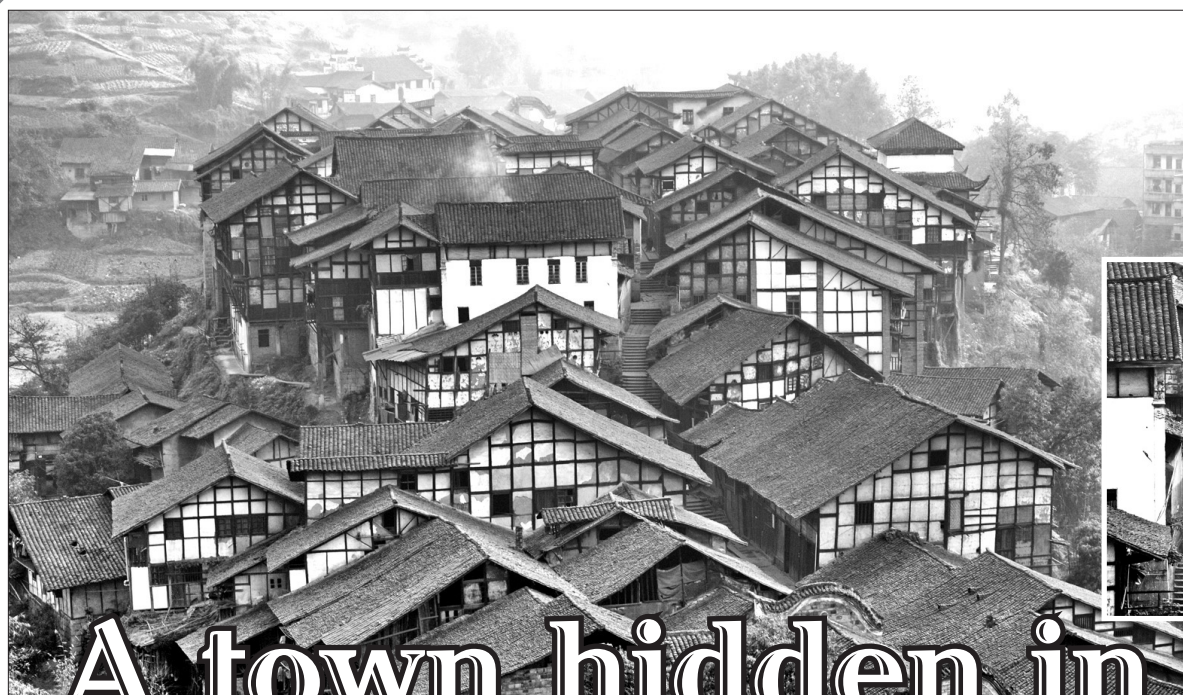
Following in Gesar's footsteps, a must-see site is the Sutra Hall of King Gesar. Legend has it that there is a large rock in Dege said to be the place where Gorsa gave birth to Gesar. To commemorate the king's birth, local people built the Temple of King Gesar near the large rock, and today, the temple has been renamed

the Sutra Hall of King Gesar.

The temple, built during the reign of Emperor Daoguang of the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644-1911), housed Gesar's ivory seal, the family records and the king's weapons.

About two kilometers away from the Sutra Hall of King Gesar is a large rock bearing imprints of the bottom half of a boy. The story goes that Gesar, possessing magic powers, conquered three demon birds when he was only three years old.

Fubao



A town hidden in the mountain

By Han Manman

Fubao, hidden away in the mountains of Sichuan Province near its border with Guizhou, is usually neglected by outsiders.

Cloaked in dense forest and fed by rivers and waterfalls, it is the habitat of many wild animals. The mountain is 46 kilometers from Hejiang County, Luzhou City. The old town has changed little throughout the centuries.

History

rebuilt after burning down

Fubao has a long history, and is referred to as one of the earliest six ancient villages, and one of the eight ancient towns of Hejiang.

First emerging in the late Song Dynasty, Fubao took shape during the Yuan Dynasty but was later burned down.

It was rebuilt in the late Qing and early Republic period. Its old streets perched on mountain slopes and its unique southern Sichuan-style buildings remain intact.

Modern Fubao is a remote location, and its under-developed state gives it a desolate look, but most of its old buildings have been well preserved.

This has made the town a popular filming location for TV series about the province. As Fubao is unknown to the majority of tourists, it is still relatively uncommercialized.

Fubao is free of the fuss and bustle of most towns. Women can be seen on the street doing needlepoint, and many children play outside or stay indoors to do homework. The best entertainment for visitors is to just walk. Many locals carry bamboo baskets on their backs.

The town remains popular in legend. The name Fubao comes from one related.

Long ago, there lived a beautiful and virtuous woman

called Xiu E. One day, her family was robbed by bandits and left penniless. Xiu's son died of starvation, her mother-in-law went blind with grief and her husband fell ill. Heartbroken, she went to the river bank to dig a grave for her son, and in the process unearthed a glossy stone.

When she took the stone home, a miracle occurred. Her son came back to life, her husband recovered and her mother-in-law regained her sight. The rock was regarded as sacred, and the site as having geomantic significance, which drew more and more people to it. Thus began Fubao.

Sights

Fubao is small but the biggest sight is its main street, called Huilong Street, or Rolling Dragon – the best preserved ancient street in the town.

Quite a few houses on both sides of Huilong Street had wooden boards hanging on their doors, with names written on them like "Sanshen Miao" (Temple of Three Gods) and "Tianhou Gong" (Temple of the Tianhou Goddess).

Beneath the wide eaves of a house on the lower part of the street, a steep stone stairway

rises behind layers of eaves. It is a perfect backdrop for a photo session.

The cliff paintings at Gaocun, crafted perfectly, are of enormous value for those interested in stone carving.

Ruined homes, ancient temples, pagodas, sculptures and murals testify to the town's long and continual history.

Not far from the town, a national-level spot named Fobao Mountain National Forest Park is a good second destination to wrap up a trip to this town.

It is the place where the preservation of species is more completed along the same latitudes in the world and is an abundant and evergreen broad-leaved species forest zone.

There are rare species of animals such as the flying bat monkey, Yuan chicken. The multiplication of the protected species such as the Yun Leopard and the Golden calf Leopard is enough to prove that the environment here is well preserved and protected, with higher research value.

Architecture

Unique timber structure

The town still follows Ming and Qing dynasty styles. Rows of stilted wooden buildings span the hillside. Between them are flagstones that wind and meander upwards to the mountain, some as wide as four meters, others so narrow as to require walking in single file.

Most of the buildings are two-stories. Business is conducted in the rooms facing the street, and domestic life in those at the rear. The old houses feature a unique timber structure with black wood columns framed the white-washed walls. The roofs are covered in gray tile with wide eaves.

Special discovery

Enjoying Tang folk arts

The town is always quiet – until the bazaar comes. During a bazaar, villagers from the rear mountain file into town one after another. They carry with them fowl, vegetables and mountain produce to display and sell on the street.

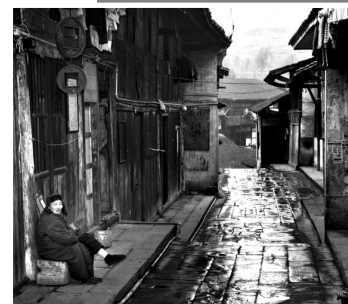
The local residents are hospitable, and quite unfazed by curious tourists dropping in for a look inside their homes. They are also happy to pose for photographs on request.

In the town, you can enjoy Tang folk arts such as Gaosheng song, folk music, Dengxi Opera and lion dances. Fubao's big performance on the water is called Futianbaodi. It perfectly interprets the glorious history and the traditional culture of the shores at Dianchi Lake.



The local residents are hospitable and unfazed by curious tourists dropping in on them.

Most of Fubao's old buildings have been well preserved.



Fubao is free of the fuss and bustle of most towns.
CFP Photos

Getting there

Take long-distance bus from Luzhou to Hejiang county for 10 yuan, and then another bus from Hejiang to Fubao for 8 yuan. From Chongqing, there is a daily bus to Fubao for 30 yuan.

Accommodation

The finest hotel in Fubao is the Fubao Hotel. There are also many home inns that cost 10 to 100 yuan.

Climate

Tourists can plan their travels any time. However, Fubao receives abundant rainfall. Always take an umbrella – especially when you go out at night.

Food

Flaky pastries, dried tofu, wild flower honey and plum wine.

L

angzhong

Scenes fit for poetry

For 2,000 years, Langzhong has been an important city for the military, culture, economy and politics. It became a famous tourism destination 1,300 years ago. One can see the whole city from atop the Huaguanglou, its highest point. People of 19 ethnic groups gather here. Streets and architecture remain in ancient style. As the famous Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu said, the beautiful scenery of Langzhong is a rarity.

History

Land of the fairies

Located in the northern part of the Sichuan Basin its center reaches the Jialingjiang River. Langzhong city was built where Bashan Mountain, Jianmen Mountain and the Jialingjiang River meet. The site made it an important military point in ancient times.

In the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), Langzhong was the capital of Ba. When Qin conquered and occupied Ba 2,300 years ago, it founded Langzhong. The city became a political, cultural and economic center that lasted through many dynasties.

In Han (202-220 BC) and

Tang (618-907) dynasties, Langzhong was an astronomy research center. During the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 BC), General Zhang Fei had guarded the city for seven years before he died and was buried here. In Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1636-1912) dynasties, Langzhong was the cap-

ital city of Sichuan Province for several years.

Langzhong is also regarded a hometown for Zhuangyuan, imperial scholars of the highest rank. Four Zhuangyuan came from Langzhong, as well as 116 people who passed the imperial exams and 404 who passed the provincial exams.



Zhang Fei Temple

Today

Center of dynasties

Walking in the city, the first thing to leave an impression is the ancient streets. Some are narrow, some are wide, some are long and some are short. Courtyards and houses are hidden throughout. The city's architectural layout is complex but exquisite.

Since Langzhong was considered an important center in many

dynasties, the emperors supported its development. In early Tang Dynasty, the local governor built halls and houses in Langzhong according to standards used when building an imperial palace.

At present, there are 60 ancient streets and thousands of ancient courtyards. Some streets were named after plants, like

Baiguoshu (ginkgo tree) Jie and Huaishu (scholartree). Others are names for historical events, like Zhuangyuan Jie.

The styles of homes in Langzhong combine the architectural characteristics of both the northern courtyard and the southern garden. Each architectural group has a different style. But they

look perfect and never make people feel uncomfortable. The exquisite pavilions, bamboo, carvings, rockeries, caged birds and swimming fish make the courtyards amazingly picturesque. History and culture, in addition to local life, has also been reflected through the houses and the people.

Sights

Huaguanglou:

View the city from the top

Huaguanglou is known as "The first building in Langyuan." It was used for guarding the Jialingjiang River in Tang Dynasty.

The four-story building is a symbol of Langzhong architecture. The arch gate in the bottom stage is open for people

to pass by.

Where: Between the Shanghais Jie and Nihau Jie, beside the Jialingjiang River

Chuanbei Gongyuan: The examination place in ancient China

Chuanbei Gongyuan was where people sat exams in ancient times and where the government went to find talented scholars.

This is the only well-preserved Gongyuan in China.

Where: on the Xuedao Jie of the city

Zhang Fei Temple: Temple of a hero, defender

Many people know Langzhong because of Zhang Fei, the famous General in the Three Kingdoms Period. He guarded the city for seven years. After he

died, locals believed his spirit remained to protect them.

The Zhang Fei Temple includes a temple and Zhang's tomb. During years since it was established, it has been damaged by fire and war. It was renovated in Ming Dynasty.

Where: 59, Xi Jie, Baoning Town, Langzhong

Tel: 0817-622 2293

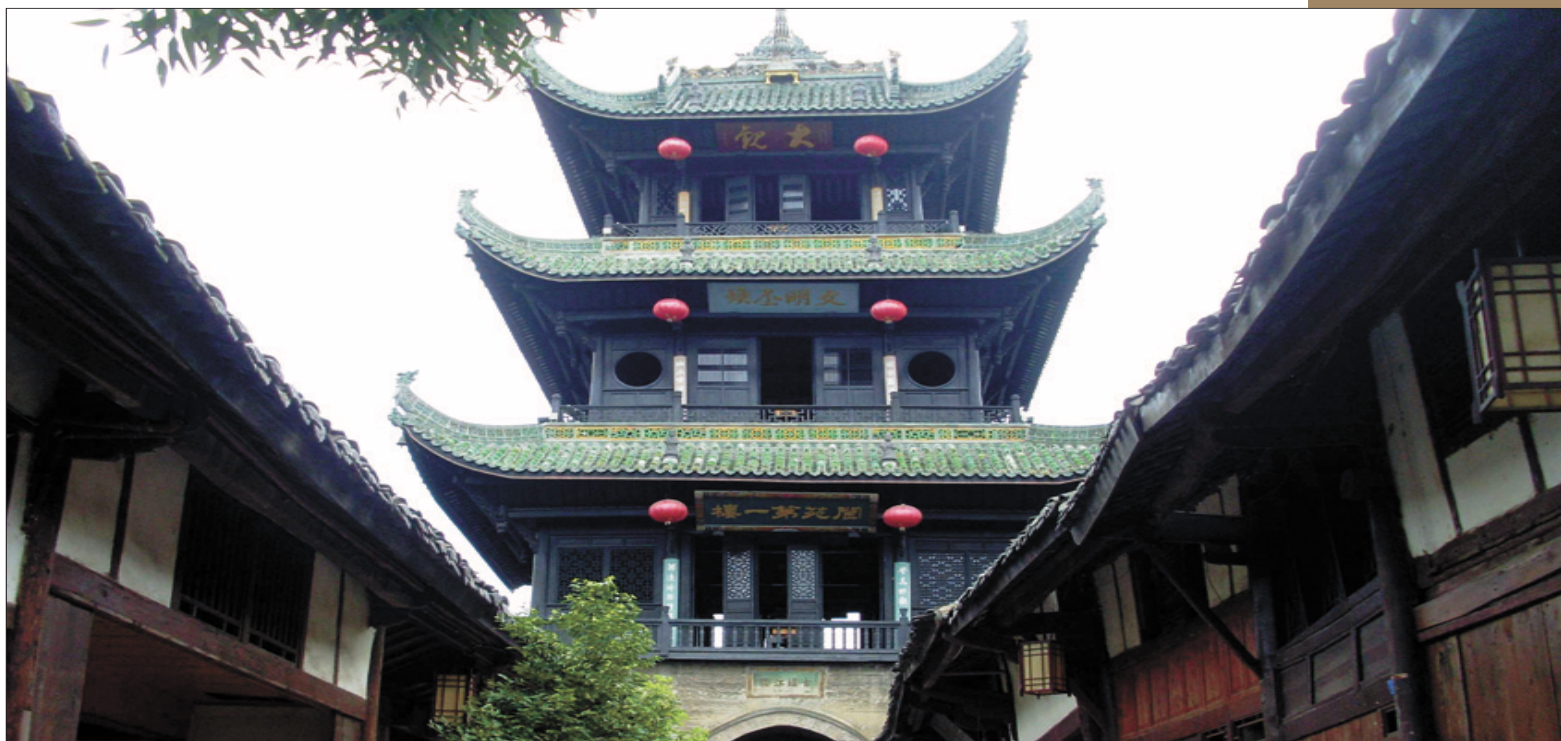
Getting there

Go to Chengdu, capital of Sichuan Province, first. Trains, planes and buses are available. Take a train from Chengdu to Guangyuan for 30 - 35 yuan. In Guangyuan, there are buses to Langzhong every hour. Tickets cost 27 - 30 yuan per person.

If you prefer to drive, follow the Chengnan Expressway to Nanchong City. Drive along 212 National Road to Langzhong for 132 kilometers. There are buses in Nanchong every 20 minutes for 25 yuan per ticket.

Tourism in Langzhong is well developed. There are star-rated hotels and local hostels. The average cost for a person is 20-50 yuan per day.

(By Jackie Zhang)



Zhang Fei Temple

CFP Photos

L

ongchang

Land of stone arches

By Li Jing

Longchang, at the border of Chengdu and Chongqing, is known as "the East gate of Sichuan." It was once an important post on the road of Bashu. Today, it is considered "The Hometown of the Ancient Stone Arch."



CFP Photo

History

A town at the crossroads

According to the town annals, Longchang was originally a post on the road of "Bashu." In 1567, Zhouzhou, Rongchang and Fushun were united to make Longchang.

The peculiar location helped Longchang reach prosperity faster than other areas, and attracted businessmen and literary types

from near and far. As time passed, it became the road's shining pearl.

Some officials and famous people erected stone archways as a symbol of the town's permanence. Four stone columns and three gates copy ancient wooden structures, and were built to symbolize the virtues of chastity, filial piety, longevity and

social service. The arches work like a billboard, and serve as a window into Longchang's culture.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, there were 70 archways built for virtues such as fealty, merit and longevity. The quantity, size, craftwork and style was the best in China.

Today

Three ancient tourism spots

The town's three ancient tourists attractions are its memorial arch, fort and Yuhu Lake: these three served as the business card of the city.

Three years ago, the county began a campaign to renovate the stone arch by the south gate. Black-tiled flat houses with bare

brick were demolished, leaving the arches standing on a broader road. Tourism facilities, such as shops and hotels, were set up along the road, making it more convenient to travel in the ancient town.

However, it is not easy to satisfy every tourist. Some com-

plaints were lodged about the construction. A blogger on sina.com said he did not like the new additions of flashing lights around the arches. He said it destroyed the serene atmosphere and ancient style. The arches by the north gate, by contrast, are better preserved.

Sights

Stone arches

If you go to Longchang, the ancient stone arches are a must-visit spot. The stone arches are not only rich in heritage but also in story.

The twelfth arch from north to south, located at the Chunniuping in the south, was built in 1871 in the Qing Dynasty for Jueluo Guohuan, head of the town at that time. It was rare

to find someone with a royal family name so far from Beijing. Guohuan was the exclusive royal county head in Longchang. The center of his arch has the words, "Unlimited happiness of the people." He had been popular in the region for his politics.

Guyu Lake

Guyu Lake, close to the village, is another site not to be missed.

Located two kilometers south-

east of Longchang and with an area of five square kilometers, Guyu Lake lies between Loufeng Mountain and Shengdeng Mountain. Six islands dot the lake where flocks of ducks and kingfishers nest. Wang Jingjing, a local tourism official, said many visitors come just to watch the birds on the lake in winter. Wang said the lake is also a good place to escape the hot summer weather.

Special discovery

Lamb soup is a meal not to be missed. It is considered one of the treasures of Longchang.

Some wonder what secret ingredients are put in the soup - special lamb or other dairy products? The secret is a blend of spices and herbal

medicine, making the soup both healthy and pleasing to the palate.

Longchang is famous for fragrant thoroughwort and is the birthplace of the "Longchang Su," the best of which is priced at more than 10,000 yuan.

Hand-made flax is another treasure. Wang said many women in Longchang are skilled at making flax. The moisture in Longchang lets the twine soften so it becomes easy to weave. Most flax products are exported to other counties.

Getting there

Trains N 772, N 751, K 139 and K191 can get you to Longchang. You can also take express buses from Water Lily Pond of Chengdu. In the county, there are buses directly leading to the Stone arch and Guyu Lake Scenic Area.

Six hotels and holiday resorts are available in the county. Family hotels can also be easily found.

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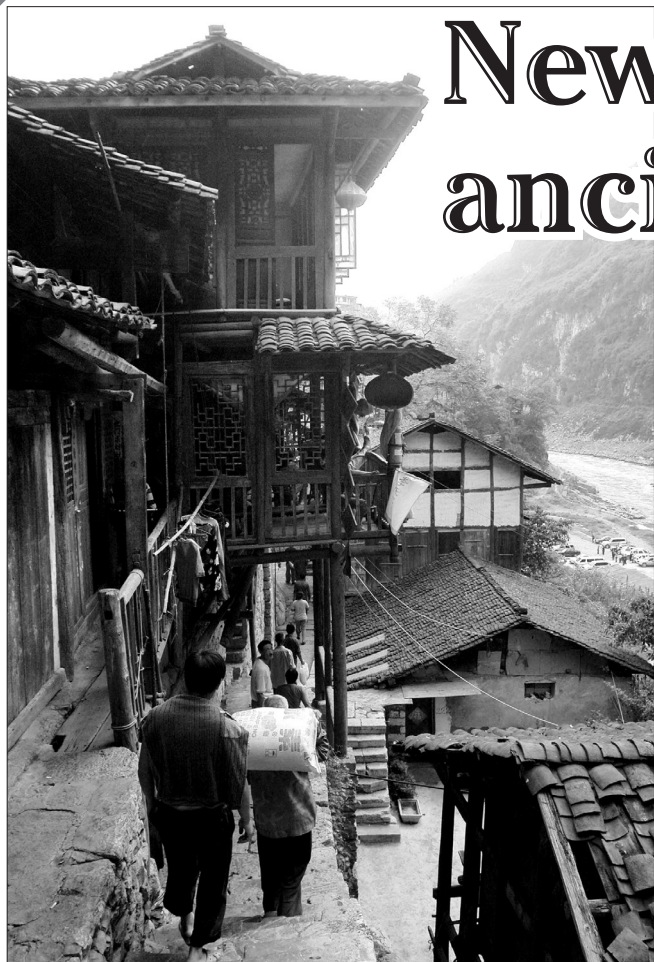
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ongtan



Gongtan Old Town features Tujia stilt-houses.

CFP Photos

New Gongtan keeps ancient Tujia flavor

By Zhang Dongya

Gongtan is one of the most famous rapids on the Wujiang River. It has helped sustain the ancient Tujia mountain life, and although it is under reconstruction, the new town is expected to retain its authentic Tujia flavor.

History

Ancient Tujia mountain life

Located in the western region of Youyang County, Chongqing City, Gongtan Old Town is a rich blend of Tujia, Miao and Han ethnicities.

Famous for its splendid stilt-houses, Gongtan has a long history. According to historical records, the town came into existence during the Three Kingdoms period, about 1,700 years ago. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Gongtan formed its well-known street, and became a mature business and trade market. With three of its sides surrounded by water, it was also an important military

base from ancient times.

The origin of the name Gongtan has several explanations. One is that most of the inhabitants of the city were surnamed Gong, and they were a rich and prominent family. However, there are few residents with the surname in the town, so another version is more popular. It is said a leader of a clan who escaped to the mountains on the Wujiang River gave himself a new name, including the surname "Gong," to protect his identity, and the place was named Gongtan after him.



Gongtan has history of 1,700 years.

Sights

Old-line stilt-house

Gongtan was built on a mountain with a slope of nearly 60 degrees. The Old Street, with its antique buildings, were kept complete in Gongtan. The street was paved with old blue-stones, which were burnished through the years until they became clear and smooth. Except for two modern buildings, the street is full of wooden stilt-houses.

The stilt-houses are divided into two types, half-suspended and whole-suspended. Each house is two or three stories. Tujia style dictates people always sleep on the upper floor and use the first floor as warehouse.

Construction of stilt-houses began as early as Song Dynasty. Some current houses have a history of 100 years. They are very durable, and have a unique art and culture about them. Many painters have been attracted to the scenery.

One of the special attractions in Gongtan is the Dayeyanhao Old House. As the exemplary representation of the local architecture, it was rebuilt after the Wujiang River flood at the beginning

of last century. All of the parts of the house can be removed and reassembled to withstand floods. During the past 100 years, it has withstood many floods, showing the great wisdom of Tujia craftsmen.

There are more than 20 old temples in Gongtan, with several like Wumiao Temple, Chuanzhu Temple and Xiqin Huiguan. Xiqin Huiguan, built in the year of Guangxu of Qing Dynasty, has been remarkably well preserved, including its Central Hall, Side Hall and Opera Theater.

Since there are many ditches in Gongtan, bridges have become a special part of the scenery in the old town. On one swift stream, there are as many as 18 bridges in a row — an amazing spectacle.

Besides these, a variety of well-preserved stone tablets are also a big attraction in Gongtan.

Inside the town, the main mode of transportation is canoe along the Wujiang River. By rowing along the Wujiang River, the long street of the town can be enjoyed like a long unrolled landscape painting.



Special discovery

New site but old flavor

Because of the reconstruction of the Pengshui Hydro Power Plant, the old town of Gongtan had to be moved. In order to preserve the historical beauty, the local government decided to duplicate the town at another site. They chose the new site a kilometer from the old place, alongside the Wujiang River. To build the new town, they reused all the old materials, including the pillars, tiles and bricks, unless they were too old. To keep a consistent style, the architects designed new materials to look old as well.

So far, of the 350 total families' houses of Gongtan, about 80 percent have been finished, and it is ready to receive tourists from all over the world. The entire con-

struction is expected to be complete by the end of this year.

The 1.5-kilometer-long Old Street was shortened to 1.2 kilometers, with the same stilt-houses on both sides. All of the antique buildings were reconstructed by local residents, including the classic stilt-houses, old temples, and ancestral halls.

The new town also improved lodging conditions. Some big hotels, like Gongtan Hotel, were redecorated. Visitors can also choose to stay with locals in their houses to experience local customs. New houses will be equipped with TV sets and separate toilets, while the 10 yuan per person price will remain unchanged.

Getting there

Transportation to Gongtan is more convenient now. Visitors can depart from Chongqing and take a train from the Chongqing North Station to Youyang, a four hour journey, and then transfer for another 1.5 hour ride to Gongtan.

Accommodation

The residents of Gongtan are famous for their clean houses. Their wooden floors are so neat and clean that visitors don't have the heart to step on them. They also like to plant flowers in their houses, especially jasmine. Some visitors could not help taking the pretty jasmine with them when they left and eventually the flower became a present from hosts to guests.

With the development of tourism in Gongtan, the old town began to adopt a commercial sense. Many sense boards have been hung to attract visitors, photos of various places in town are displayed and hand crafted souvenirs are sold on the street.

Food

The food in Gongtan is mainly Tujia. Mullets, thick local flavor, and bitter buckwheat wine are both good choices.

Luo Cheng

China's Noah's Ark

By He Jianwei

In 1983, the China Southwest Architecture Design and Research Institute displayed an aerial-view photograph of Luo Cheng at the International Trade Fair in Guangzhou. Luo Cheng Ancient Town is located 60 kilometers northeast of Jianwei County, in Leshan City. The town is famous for its size and shape – it was built to resemble a ship – and is a member of the 100 Classic Chinese Ancient Towns.

History

A ship on land

According to county records, Luo Cheng was built during the first year of Emperor Chongzhen's reign in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and has been known as the waterless wharf of the county since ancient times.

Legend has it that a scholar

surnamed Zhang advised the town be built in a ship's shape. When he passed through the town, he saw people everywhere praying for rain. He left a poem suggesting that the town be built into a ship, so as to ensure an everlasting water supply. The

idea was snatched up as a last resort to fight the drought, or perhaps the scholar was believed to be a god in disguise who had come to save the town. Whatever the case, hundreds of artisans worked hard to convert the main street into a ship.



The eaves are broad, and hang into the street, forming a long corridor called "Liangtingzi", meaning "hall of shade".

CFP Photos

Today

Path to fame

It is said that this small town of fewer than 2,000 residents boasted 12 temples in the past, five of which were later converted into provincial guild houses for business people. Local residents still adhere to ancient traditions, and there are still many temple events throughout the year. Sometimes residents carry Buddha statues from the temples and parade them through the main street, and villagers from nearby mountains flock to the town to put on lion dance and dragon lantern shows.

In the 1980s, tour operators from Australia stumbled into Luo Cheng and were fascinated by its original ideas for small town development. They duplicated this exotic Chinese town 24 kilometers away from Melbourne.

Long corridor

On either side of the boat-shaped street, there is a long row of wooden houses with old roof tiles. These eaves are extraordinarily broad, and hang into the street, forming a long corridor called "Liangtingzi," meaning "hall of shade." Supporting these eaves are giant beams made of centuries-old round logs, which stand on long hexagonal stone pillars. For hundreds of years, the local people of Luo Cheng have paused to drink, eat, have tea, listen to simple songs, smoke and sell simple medicine under the shade of the Liangtingzi. Nowadays, new shops cater to the local people in place of the old ones, but the residents have still kept the tradition of drinking tea beneath the Liangtingzi.

Water and salt

Water has always been an integral part of Luo Cheng. Before a tap water system was installed throughout the town, a pail of water was traditionally the best gift to express congratulations when someone enrolled in a university or joined the army. When local government officials visited families of retired cadres, soldiers' families, revolutionary martyrs' families, or families that receive government subsidies, water was always at the top of the gift list.

Walking the streets of Luo Cheng, visitors can see big steel pipelines. If you believe the pipes are used for carrying the water, you are definitely wrong. Luo Cheng has an abundance of salt resources, and the pipelines carry brine to Wutongqiao Town, where a factory produces salt.

Architecture

Unique design

Luo Cheng's one-of-a-kind design begins with the town's main street, which was recreated to resemble a ship. The street, overflowing with the beauty of late afternoon, is said to be the only boat-shaped street in China. The road stretches over 200 meters from west to east, with narrow ends and a bulging middle section nearly 9 meters across. A temple stands at the west end to act as the ship's bow, and another at the far east end. Buildings along the sides of the street mimic the shipboard, and in the center is a theater, which looks like the cabin. Since its construction, this old street has preserved the artistic style and characteristics of ancient Sichuan culture from the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Getting there

From the Xinnanmen Bus Station in Chengdu, the trip to Luo Cheng takes 1.5 hours. The cost is 36 to 60 yuan, depending on the type of bus.

From the Leshan Bus Station in Leshan, the trip takes one hour. The cost is 10 yuan for a regular bus and 5 yuan for a mini-bus.

Climate

The central-Asian Leshan area has a tropical climate and distinct seasons. The annual average temperature is 16.5 - 18 C. During the warmer months there is plenty of rainfall, and there is only a short time with frost during the coldest months. The best times to visit are spring and autumn. Be sure to bring raincoats if you visit during the rainy season.

Northwestern Sichuan is a plateau, and temperature range between the day and night is very wide.

It is advisable to carry rain gear and several over-the-counter drugs, as well as cold weather clothing, when traveling there.

Tel: Tourism department of Luo Cheng 0778-822 2812



Life at a leisurely

The tempo
from other cit
visitors walk a
tea houses, or



pace in Sichuan

of life in Sichuan is the polar opposite of Beijing. Even Chinese tourists are amazed that the local people have so much time to relax. When along the streets in Sichuan, they find many people spending their time in playing mahjong or card games.



Illustrated by Mango

Tea House Life

Sichuan can be called a province of tea houses and they can be found in every city, town and village.

Sichuan tea houses represent Chinese tea customs and tea-house culture. There were tea houses and tea booths as far back as the Tang Dynasty in Sichuan. A typical tea house is usually composed of copper teapots, tin cup holders, porcelain-covered bowls, bowl-shaped compressed tea or jasmine tea and tea masters.

As the saying goes, "Sunny days are not so many as tea houses in Sichuan." They are not merely places for people to relax, rest and chat, but also locales, in olden times, for discussing and solving problems and settling disputes.

Spend a day in a Sichuan tea house and you will have a better understanding of Sichuan people's local life as it has been for hundreds of years.

Thousands of teahouses are scattered about the city and they provide the locals a place for social gatherings, entertainment, get-togethers with relatives and a place to make new friends and meet up with old ones.

Mahjong and card games

The games played in Sichuan play an important role in the leisure time of its residents. The two most popular are mahjong and the card game Dou Di Zhu, "fight the landlord."

Mahjong is a game enjoyed throughout China and around the world, but nowhere does it have such popularity as in Sichuan. Almost every resident knows how to play, from the oldest senior citizen to the youngest school child.

Everywhere you go, you will find people playing mahjong. It can be seen on the streets, in tea houses, in mahjong houses and at home.

In the other game, Dou Di Zhu, one player plays the landlord and the other two team up to fight him.

Sichuan dining

Sichuan cuisine is one of the eight great cuisines in China and is famous all over the world for its richness and variety. Characterized by spicy and pungent flavors, Sichuan cuisine, with a myriad of tastes, emphasizes the use of chili, red peppers and garlic.

Sichuan food is known for being spicy. It is said that one who does not experience it has never reached Sichuan. Typical menu items are hot pot, smoked duck, Kung Pao Chicken, Twice Cooked Pork and Mapo Tofu.

Unique opera

Sichuan Opera is characterized by unique solos, refined acting, rich percussion and talented comedians whose skills are unparalleled.

It features vivid, humorous narration, singing and acrobatics. It also boasts a system of stylized movements and its acting is both exquisite and lively. Sichuan Opera performances are always full of wit, humor, lively dialogue and pronounced local flavor. To portray special characters, the opera incorporates a series of stunts, including the famous "face-changing." In Chinese opera, facial makeup is usually painted, but in Sichuan Opera, the performer can change his or her facial makeup in the snap of a finger right on stage.

"Face-changing" is achieved by quickly tearing off, rubbing, or blowing away a mask to reveal another.

The performer prepares many special masks in advance made of gauze and elastic materials, such as sheep embryo membranes and rubber. After the masks are painted with different designs and assembled with a special transparent thread, they are pasted on to the performer's face.

The special masks for changing faces must be tailor made to fit the performer's face perfectly and pasted as close as possible to the skin.



A Hakka habitat in southwest

Luodai, at the foot of the Longquan Mountain, is the largest inhabitant place for the Hakka, sometimes called "Oriental Jews," in southwest China. The city with thousand-year-old streets, many Ming and Qing Dynasty architectures and interesting Hakka culture is a fascinating old town to explore during the holidays.



Hakka people have traditional ceremony to remember their ancestors every April.

CFP Photos

History

How Hakka came to Sichuan

The establishment of the ancient town came from a legend that a belt of Emperor Liu Chan of the Kingdom of Shu Han (221-263) fell into a local octagonal well. In Chinese, the sound made was called "luodai."

Most of the Hakka people there are migrants who were forced by Manchurian rulers

into Sichuan Province from Guangdong, Jiangxi and Hubei provinces during the early Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Now there are 20,000 Hakka living in Luodai, making up 90 percent of the local population.

In 2005, the 20th World Hakka Reunion Conference was held in Luodai, which

proved the importance of the ancient township to Hakka people around the globe.

Most Sichuan Hakka are from Guangdong Province. The Hakka in Luodai call their spoken language "vulgar Guangdong Hakkanese," which is very close to the standard Hakkanese in Meizhou,

Guangdong Province. These people in Sichuan live in places isolated by mountains and they have little connection with people from other minorities.

Folk songs are popular among the Hakka, when they cut firewood in the mountains or take a break during work, young people sing.

Sights

Assembly-halls preserve Hakka history

The most famous ancient buildings are the Huguang (Hubei-Guangdong) Assembly Hall, Jiangxi Assembly Hall, Guangdong Assembly Hall and Chuanbei (North Sichuan) Assembly Hall. The Sichuan Hakka History Museum is also a must-see.

All of the halls are on Shangxia Street. It is a gathering place for the Hakka to meet relatives and make friends, connect with each other, settle clan disputes and dedicate sacrifices to ancestors and gods.

The Huguang Assembly Hall is about a five-minute walk from the rear main gate. The hall is actually a compound courtyard with a theater stage, halls and houses. It was built by the Hakka from Hubei and Guangdong provinces in 1743 to offer sacrifices to the legendary figure Dayu and was also named Dayu Palace.

Rich with artifacts and documents, the Sichuan Hakka History Museum records the history, culture, language and

customs of the Hakka people in Sichuan and in China. The museum offers interesting information, including the fact that late Chinese leaders, such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Madame Soong Qing-ling, Deng Xiaoping and Zhu De, were Hakka.

Jiangxi Assembly Hall was established by Hakka from Jiangxi Province in 1753 to offer sacrifice to Xu Zhenjun, a sage and god of south Jiangxi Province. It was also called "Wanshou (Longevity) Palace." The Guangdong Assembly

Hall is one of the largest and best preserved of its kind in China.

It was established by Hakka from Guangdong Province in 1746 to offer sacrifices to Huineng, the founder of Zen Buddhism, and was also named "Nanhua (South China) Palace."

In the central hall hangs a pair of couplets engraved with the words, "To taste the local flavor of Sichuan by tobacco leaves and to hear the ancient sound of the Central Plains through the Hakka language."

Culture

Water-splash festival and dragon-dancing

Dragon-dancing is a traditional tradition. For several hundred years, Hakka people have been the best performers of dragon dances. They pray for rain with a water dragon dance during drought-stricken years.

When the water dragons appeared during the festival, everybody runs around excit-

edly with squirt guns, waterpots and ladles. In addition, the tourists enjoy singing and dancing, Gongfu tea and enjoying special soup as well as the sootiness goose in restaurants. During the festival, the Carnival of Beer, juvenile painting, calligraphy as well as singing and dancing and fruit assess-

ment contests are held.

The Liu family in Luodai is the most famous for dragon dances with two kinds: fire-dragon and water dragon. Normally, the fire-dragon has seven parts while the water dragon has nine. They have lived in this town for more than 300 years and dragon dances were handed

down from generation to generation. The Lou family's dragon dances maintain the most original ceremonies.

To attract tourists back to Sichuan after the quake, local government has prepared a lot of cultural activities during the October holidays.

(By Annie Wei)

Getting there

Luodai is 20 kilometers away from downtown Chengdu. Visitors can take bus 219 from Chengdu Tourism Bus Station to Luodai. It costs 5.5 yuan and takes 30 minutes.

There are many three-wheeled carts in the town. For a couple of yuan, the cart-rider will tour visitors around the ancient town.

Famous local dishes include Niangdofu (stuffed tofu) and Yanjuji (salt-baked chicken).

Local mushrooms are very famous.

Highly-recommended dishes are smoked goose from Gongxiaoshe Hotel, wild mushroom dishes from Xinmin Hotel and snacks and noodle soup from Hakka Hotel.



Sichuan is known for its varied types of snacks.



Dragon and salt

By Gan Tian

Would you ever believe that there is a town made of salt? Luoquan is just such a place. By looking closely at this unique town in the center of Sichuan Province, you can see that the town is laid out just like a dragon. *Beijing Today* takes you there to get your a little "salty."



History

History hiding in the primitive nature

Luoquan town is hidden in the trees and mountains of Renshou, Weiyuan and Zizhong counties. Qiuxihe, a branch of Tuojiang River, passes by.

The history of Luoquan dates back to the Qin Dynasty (221BC-206BC), but its famous salt industry peaked during the reign of Emperor Guangxu

(1875-1909), when there were 1,500 salt wells. The salt produced in Luoquan is such high quality that it won the gold prize at the World Fair in 1925.

The Salt Deity Temple, first built in 1868, witnessed this prosperity. The Qi Kingdom official Guanzhong (479-502) was instrumental in the development

and management of the salt industry during the Qi Kingdom period, and when the temple was built, the people of Luoquan put a sculpture of Guanzhong inside to be the salt deity of the temple, and offered sacrifices. On the left and right sides of the salt deity are the statues of Guanyu and the fire deity, who

both act as assistants to the salt god. The temple has three layers of brims and upturned wings, and on the roof of the main hall is a sculpted picture of a host of dragons playing and competing to take hold of a treasure. The picture still looks vivid and lively even after a hundred years of weathering.

Sights

People worry that Luoquan is losing its traditional flavor as the world develops and modernizes. It once had "jiugong yisi bamiao," or "nine palaces, one shrine, and eight temples," but because of insufficient protection, they no longer grace the city's landscape. Many temples have been destroyed over the centuries. Now, the best-preserved one is the Salt Deity Temple.

The town's residents are relatively poor compared to other places in China, and Luoquan received its single flat road to the nearest county just three years ago. Now life is better in Luoquan, but at the expense of many of the ancient wooden buildings.

Old street

The 500 meter-long Old

Street in Luoquan is the only street in the town. Wood houses with gray tiles line both sides of the street, and there are 10 busy teahouses. The street is shaped like a Chinese dragon, which is why Luoquan is also called "the dragon town." The people of Luoquan are hardworking, simple and friendly. You can sit in any of the teahouses, drinking tea and listening to old people telling their glorious history in Tianfu dialect. Tianfu, meaning "land of abundance," is another name for Sichuan.

The Salt Deity Temple

The Salt Deity Temple is the head of the "dragon" on Old Street. Today, the Salt Deity Temple is a popular gathering place for the

local people. Walking leisurely around in the temple, you can enjoy the same feelings of simplicity. Entering the temple gate and crossing the ancient stage, you can see a wide square in front of the temple, surrounded by side buildings and corridors. After climbing the steps and entering the main hall, you can see a window in the ceiling, and white clouds floating in the blue sky. Ten thick wooden stakes support the temple. Weeds on the eaves wave in the wind, as if whispering the stories of the old town.

The Stone Dragon

Not far from the Salt Deity Temple, there is a bridge just outside town that crosses the Qiuxihe River. At the end of the bridge stands a stone

dragon holding a ball in its mouth. This stone dragon is the treasure of the town. Some locals say that when this stone dragon was found in the waters of the Qiuxihe, the day was sunny, without any cloud in the sky. Local people gathered at the banks to watch the stone dragon be lifted by a crane. As soon as it emerged from the water, thunder and lightening ripped across the sky, and a torrent of rain pounded the town. The rope of the crane snapped, and the dragon plunged back into the river. The locals of Longquan asked the neighboring Zizhong County for steel ropes. When the stone dragon was finally hauled from the river, the sky cleared immediately.

Special discovery

Tofu feast and photos

The delicious local food is a must if you want to enjoy Luoquan to its fullest. "Tofu feast" is a dish not to miss. Ground by millstones, the tofu made in Luoquan is tender and soft, and tastes hot, spicy and fresh.

Luoquan is a good place for taking photos. Tourists should take camera lenses and film that are suitable for the environment of an ancient town.

CFP Photos



Getting there

Tourists who drive to Luoquan can take the Chengdu-Chongqing Highway and exit at the Qiuxihe Exit. The speed limit is 100 kilometers per hour, and takes about one hour to reach the exit. The road toll along the way is 45 yuan.

Another option is the old Chengdu-Chongqing highway. However, this road has many curves, and is usually very crowded, making for difficult driving. It takes about two and a half hours by this route to reach Qiuxihe. From Qiuxihe, the 22 kilometer road from Qiuxihe to Luoquan is of average condition, and it takes about 30 minutes from there to reach the town. Tourists can also take a bus from the Hehuachi Passenger's Transport Center in Chengdu to Luoquan Town. The buses leave at 9 am everyday, and the price is 20-25 yuan.

Accommodations in the ancient town are average. Take care to choose clean and safe hotels or guesthouses. Prices are in the range from 5 to 10 yuan per night.

Some hotels visitors might find useful are listed below:

Guquan Hotel provides a clean environment and delicious food. Visitors can try "jiang rou" salted meat here, and each dish costs no more than 8 yuan. Tel: 0832-5980165.

Sidajing Hotel is near the entrance of Luoquan town. The dish "Tofu Feast" is provided here. Tel: 0832-5980281.

Kangle Hotel has free parking. Tel: 0832 - 598 0327.



Little Hollywood comes to town

By Wang Yu

Yaoba is a gorgeous scenic spot and has a reputation as the "Studio Town of Southern Sichuan" because of its unique features that have attracted many movie makers. The town became the base for many works, including the controversial movie *Da Hong Mi Dian* which is also the name of a famous ancient building. Because of this, many of the residents have had the experience of being a movie extra.



The main street on a rainy day. CFP Photos

History

The little Hong Kong in Sichuan

The ancient town of Yaoba is located on the border of Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, 22 kilometers from Luzhou, a city in the south of Sichuan. The town covers an area of 64 square kilometers and has a population of 6,000. It also has diverse landforms, dense vegetation, a genial climate, many

places of historic interest and scenic beauty.

The town used to be a military fortress during the reign of Emperor Yuan Feng of the Northern Song Dynasty, and received the name of "Yaoba bazaar" in the Jiading years of the Southern Song Dynasty.

Yaoba also has long been

described as the corridor between Sichuan and Guizhou. It is a hub for economic exchange of the region, where the ancient roadways are still in use today. Furthermore, it was called "little Hong Kong" due to the flourishing market in town before the highway was constructed between Chi-

shui and Luzhou.

In addition to Fawang Temple in Southern Sichuan, Yaoba is also recognized as another holy land of Chinese Buddhism for its reverent history and profound culture.

In modern times, travel business is the pillar industry of the town.



Living an ancient life

Architecture

The houses and the main street

In a sense, Yaoba is a street rather than a town, as the ancient city is located along the sides of the ancient main street, with over 2,000 green tile houses.

The street is an S shape and can also be described as a

"dragon," with the Gate of The Imperial Scholar as the head, and the town square as the tail.

In Yaoba you can find houses of typical southern Sichuan style. Most of the structures along the street have a timber frame and are double-decked.

The surface of the street is covered with strip stones made of red arenite. The drainage system underground is still in a good condition, and there is a fire pool every 200 meters along the channel underneath the street.



Gate of The Imperial Scholar

Sights

The holy temples

The most famous place in Yaoba that draws visitors' attentions is *Da Hong Mi Dian*, also known as The Mansion Of The Imperial Scholar. The structure was built by a military imperial scholar of the Qing Dynasty after he gained a reputation for himself. 150 years later, the building has become the landmark of Yaoba, and a tablet hanging on

its main wall describes the history of the town.

The cloistered, timber frame building has a yard in the center. The two fire seal carvings are still complete. The carved beams and painted rafters of the cloisters have a style of elegance, and the residents living nearby were all local rich nobility until the PRC

was founded in 1949.

Dongyue Temple is another must visit spot in Yaoba. The temple is located in the center part of the town, inside a group of buildings built against the Jiulong Jubao Mountain, one of which is a theatrical chamber. Being at the commanding height of the ancient street, the temple covers an area of 6,500

square meters, and the theatrical chamber can hold hundreds of spectators.

On the top floor of the temple there is Dong Huang Dian, which worships Dong Yue Da Di, the main god there. According to tradition, March 28 by the lunar calendar is the day of sacrifices, when people of the town hold temple fairs.

Special discovery

As a town of history, the people of Yaoba are dedicated to public events. Every year, on days of local feasts, like Yao Wang festival, more activities are available, and travel-

ers can take part in the shows. The show "Niu Niu Deng," which is performed by two actors, represents farming in ancient times.

The water in the pool of

the Dongyue Temple changes color according to the season, and its level stays stable even though it is located on the top of the mountain.

There are two stelae in front

of the Hall of the Chuanzhu Bodhisattva, the left of which is carved with the pattern of the sun and stays dry all year round, while the stele of moon on the right is always wet.

Getting there

Buses from Luzhou to Yaoba leave the Luzhou Hui Long Wan Tuo station from 8:30 am every 40 minutes until 10:30 am, and every hour thereafter. The fare is 13 yuan.

Buses from Hejiang to Yaoba leave the Cai Ba Station every 30 minutes starting at 6 am. The fare is 8 yuan.

Accommodation

There are seven hotels in Yaoba, including some home inns. In total, they can receive 240 travelers at one time.

Climate

Luzhou City has a sub-tropical humid climate. The weather is generally sub-tropical, with varying elevations, abundant sunshine, heat, abundant rainfall, and an average temperature of 18 C. The best time to travel is the end of summer and the beginning of autumn.

Food

"Hong Tang Yang Rou", which is made of mutton, is a famous local traditional food. Desserts such as "Huang Ba" and "Huang Gao Ba" should also not be missed.

S hangli

Town on the Silk Road

By Jin Zhu

Not many people have heard of the ancient town of Shangli in Sichuan Province. Shangli is located on the boundaries of four adjoining counties, 27 kilometers north of Ya'an City, and 129 kilometers southwest of the provincial capital, Chengdu.

History

From an ancient town to tourist spot

Originally named Luosheng, Shangli was an important stop on the famous Silk Road. In more modern times, the Red Army also passed through Shangli during the Long March.

Today, Shangli has the nostalgia of an ancient town. It is rich in cultural artifacts and has a beautiful landscape. Because of its rural features and the finest Qing dynasty infrastructure in the region, many movie

makers have used the town as a shooting location in recent years.

Lately, residents in Shangli have benefitted from the tourism industry, which has created a surge in restaurants and guest houses. With increasing numbers of tourists, it is common to see visitors in miniskirts talking on cell phones cross paths with wizened old men ravaged by time.

In May 2008 however, the Sichuan earthquake dev-

astated the thriving tourism industry. Before the earthquake, Shangli could attract 10,000 visitors on a peak weekend. However, for a month after the earthquake, not one person came to Shangli, even though the town sustained no damage.

Shangli has recovered from the effects of the earthquake, and more and more people now flock to the town because many nearby areas remain closed.

Architecture

Han's courtyard

Shangli houses mostly lie off the main road, and there are many famous stone paved streets in the town. Since it was once a gathering place for merchants, much of the architecture bears the style and features of the Ming and Qing dynasties. The houses in the ancient town are relatively well preserved, and most are grey-tiled.

Shangli was also home to many wealthy families in old times. One of the most famous buildings is

the Han family's courtyard. The courtyard was built by Han Tingfan, an important local Qing official. Since the house had seven dooryards, it earned the poetic name "surrounded by seven stars." Today, the old Han courtyard serves as offices for the township government.

In April on Qingming Festival, or tomb-sweeping day, residents of Shangli honor their ancestors by visiting their graves. They light firecrackers or burn

incense and candles.

During that period, many tourists often drive to Shangli to see these traditions.

Slaughtering pigs within the first two months of every Chinese New Year is another custom in Shangli. Residents invite all their friends and relatives to participate in the activity, as a way to wish them the best. People living in the city have no chance to see this tradition, but tourists have come here to enjoy living in the countryside.

Culture

Beautiful landscape

Shangli is located by mountains and water, and canals run through the whole city. There are hills on the farms, unique houses, and stone streets. The town builds bamboo, stream, and ancient bridges, all of which contrast beautifully with each other.

The town is famous for its eight stone bridges, especially the "two fairies bridge" in the center of the city. There is a legend behind the 300 year-old ancient bridge, which says that two fairies offered their help to protect the old bridge from flooding in ancient times. Therefore, the residents in Shangli now call the bridge the "two fairies bridge." Every day at

dusk, oil painters set up their easels on a flat stone near the creek that runs through Shangli, and many of them chose the ancient stone bridge with a waterfall as their subject.

The ancient town also has other scenic spots, such as Shuangjiexiao Stone Memorial Arch and Baima Spring. Shuangjiexiao Stone Memorial Arch is a stone structure with four pillars, three rooms, double roofs and five backyards.

There are more than 20 carved story pictures and over 100 figures, all perfectly and vividly carved.

A pair of Shuangdou masts are at the front, which are the one of the trademark

products of Chinese carved stone crafts. In the past, Shuangjiexiao Stone Memorial Arch replicas, which were also called "Chastity Paifangs," were given to widows who remained unmarried until death, praising their loyalty to their deceased husband.

Baima Spring was established in the Tang dynasty as a provincial historical site. The spring is rare because of its thermostatic function. Generally speaking, the perennial temperature is always about 15 °C.

In addition to the spring, there is a large stage in the center of the town. In ancient times, it was a cleverly designed performing hall.



A view of the old streets of Shangli.

CFP Photos



Quiet life in the countryside

Getting there

Shangli can be seen in one or two days. To get there, take the bus from the Xinnanmen bus station in Chengdu and get off at the Shiyangchang bus station, and then take the bus from Ya'an to Shangli.

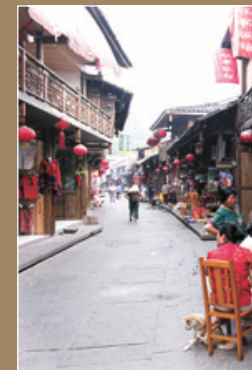
If you are driving yourself, you can use the Chengya freeway and get off at the Ya'an Bei exit and continue on to Shangli.

Tourist Fees

1 yuan for Han's courtyard, 1 yuan for Shuangjiexiao Stone Memorial Arch, 2 yuan for Baima Spring.

Accommodation

It is not difficult to find guest houses in the center of Shangli, and the prices vary from 100 yuan to 300 yuan per night in general.



A local scene

Tanghe

Surrounded by a river



The town is very poetic.

Photos by Su Xiaoyu

The town of Tanghe on the southwest frontier of Jiangjin, Chongqing, was built adjacent to a mountain, which makes it look like it is leaning against the remote mountain. It is a small town with a river flowing through it. The pier is where the town starts, from which the ladders lead people to the main street through three gates. Walking on its slates and looking at the old-fashioned compound courtyards around, a sense of solitude fills the heart.

History

History hiding in the primitive nature

The town has a long history that dates back 2,000 years. It became a town during the Ming Dynasty when a Wangye Temple was first constructed.

Not until Qing Dynasty did the town reach its prime. Initially people here were mainly from three big families: Wang, Chen and the

Sun. During Qing, many immigrants moved in forcing expansion. Tanghe got its name from moat that encircled the town. "Tanghe" means the small river around villages.

As an important logistics hub of Chongqing, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces, Tanghe began to prosper long

ago. In the old days, horses and boats carried business people to and fro, that was the usual scene of the town's deep and splendid civilian history.

Once a remote old town, Tanghe is now well developed. As a small town with few visitors, the town's architecture and ecological areas are

in good shape. People here have little desire for profit, like those who live in the more famous scenic regions.

The old town is kind of ghostlike since most young people have moved away. Only several seniors remain so that there are few lights in the town at night.



The villagers are cooking.

Architecture and culture

Odd architectural style and wedding

The historical buildings of Ming and Qing dynasties take up a lot of space and can be divided into three main parts, the old blocks, the Shilongmen Manor and the Tingzhongci.

From the upper street to the lower, the townspeople share the only road which is paved with stone slates. On both sides of the streets is the drainage system designed by ancient architects. No matter the amount of rain or the sewage people dump, it is

all drained away along the sewers and the slates leaving the roads clean.

The most interesting thing about the town is that many houses are built in a Hui style that is rarely seen in the Sichuan and Chongqing area. Hui means Anhui, a province in the southeast. The Hui style architectures is exquisite and elaborate with refined carvings and beautiful forms on the walls and the roofs. The carvings on the wood or the

stones are usually originate from folk-tales and dramas. The houses are simple and blend well.

Over hundreds of thousands of years, Tanghe has formed a unique folk culture, some of which endures today.

Wedding etiquette is one point. People in Tanghe continue their tradition of Crying and the Chair War. Crying means the bride sings and cries to her parents, brothers and sisters to show her love for them.

In the three-day wedding, the Chair War is the most exciting part. The new couple are not gentle at this time. When their bedroom's door opens, both of them rush to the chair to be the first one to sit on it. It is said that the person who sits in the chair first, will be the most respectable one in the family.

Other customs like praying for rain and the parade are all a good time to enjoy the festivities, which are much different from in the cities

Sights

Temples and beautiful mountain

Wangye Miao (Duke Temple)

It is called Qingyuan Temple now but once it was the Duke Temple. It is the oldest architecture in the town, which was built during Ming. There is the main hall and the drama platform in the temple. Built on bluestones and having bricks and wood as walls, the temple is full of ancient atmosphere.

Shilongmen Manor

Two kilometers away from

the old blocks is the Shilongmen built in 1740. It has more than 500 rooms. The delicate design and the great scale make it a grand and imposing relic. There are nine gates and eighteen patios that add to the manor's magnificence and eeriness. Entering it and passing through the courts may easily lead people to get lost like in a labyrinth.

Tingzhongci Shrine

Also called the Sun's Shrine,

Tingzhongci was built in 19th century and was owned by the Sun clan. The shrine is a palace-type construction and comprises the main hall, the middle hall and the drama theatre. Its curled-up cornices, engraved beams and colorful embosses are the most attractive parts.

Mountain scenery

Two thousand Cyathea Spinulosa trees, each more than 10,000 years old, grow in

the Cyathea Spinulosa Village. They are justly called the aborigines of this area.

The Hongyandong Zhaiqun is a cluster of ancient villages on the cliff. The woods and stones served as access to the villages.

Also there is a cluster of 2,000-year-old tombs on the east side of the mountain with 15 caves to hold the tombs.

(By Zheng Lu)

Getting there

Take a bus at Caiyuanba Bus station in Chongqing. It costs 21 yuan to Jiangjin. And then take the minibus from Jiangjin to Tanghe, costing 11 yuan.

Accommodations

Keyuan Shanzhuang, another hotel on the opposite bank over the river, costs 60 yuan. It has a panoramic view of the town.

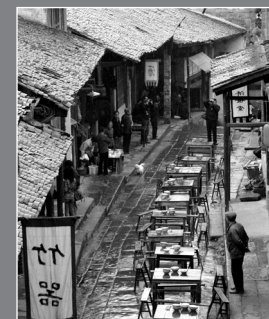
Tel: 023-47810 009

Yuanyanghu Hotel on the mountain offers a standard room for 40 yuan.

Tel: 023-4734 6518

Foods

Twist of dough, swelled candy rice and the plum liqueur produced here are recommended. Generally a meal costs 15 yuan per person.



Street scene

Taopingqiangzhai

Taoping, ancient Qiang village

By Venus Lee

Taoping Village, located in Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, about 170 kilometers west of Chengdu, is the best-preserved village exclusively inhabited by the Qiang ethnic group.

Architecture

The ancient castle in the East

The most outstanding feature of the village is its labyrinthine arrangement. Its maze-like manner and durable architecture have earned it the moniker "the ancient castle in the East."

The village has eight gates and 31 inter-connecting lanes leading to each household in a maze-like manner. Villagers say that during wartime periods these lanes provided a form of defense as they were used to move supplies and plan ambushes. The loopholes left in the walls along these lanes are evidence of the village's warlike history.

Another fascinating feature of Taoping village is its complex and highly effective water supply network. Subterranean channels run beneath each street and house, enabling water to be drawn simply by lifting a stone slab. The sound of running water is easily audible, yet not a drop is in sight.

Sights

Stone kingdom

Diaolou

The mountain top or ridge is dominated by two towering square stone lookouts, or *diaolou* in Chinese which are the most symbolic buildings of the village. Diaolou used to be of great military significance in the past during periods of violent conflicts throughout the centuries, and they have also survived erosion and still stood firmly for centuries even though the region was frequently stricken by

earthquakes. The village is well known for its thickly-dotted turret buildings. The non-nomadic Qiang settled in the mountainous regions of northwest part of Sichuan more than 2,000 years ago. The village was built in 111 BC and has survived erosion and countless scourges of war.

earthquakes.

In these two hexahedral blockhouses, mechanics and aesthetics were obviously combined subtly. They are 20-30 meters high with nine floors and there are shooting windows on the four sides of each floor. The towers with internal ladders have lookouts on two of the highest levels offering a commanding 360-degree view with the holes on the garret floors being used for conveying information. According to historical records,



Qiang's turret buildings became prevalent during Sui and Tang dynasties.

The Qiang house

The Qiang build their homes from stone, timber and mud, judging all measurements by eye, rather than using a design or plan, yet all buildings stand firm, straight and for long periods. Although modest, Qiang dwellings are tastefully decorated with paintings and ceramic handicrafts. The average home has five stories and a narrow wooden staircase. Livestock is kept on the first floor, and the living room, bedrooms and kitchen are on the second and third floor. Grains are dried and stored on the fourth floor and the fifth is a place of worship where white stones are



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arranged upon which sacrifices are offered.

The living room has a wooden floor and several wooden pillars support the roof. The focal point of the living room is the huge fireplace made from stone slabs in the center with seating around the walls. It is where family and friends gather to celebrate weddings, births and festivals. On it stands a metal tripod flanked by steel woks and copper pots. The fire burns the whole year round, since it is cold for most of the year. Overhead hangs a timber board with a thin stone slab lying on top.

Custom

Qiang is one of the most ancient ethnic groups in China, which has its own nationality characteristic festivals and taboos.

Festivals – The Qiang New Year falls on the first day of the tenth lunar month. Celebrations last three to five days, during which sacrifices are made to the god of the heavens, the god of the mountain and the god of the village.

Taboos – Qiang households should not be visited when a family member is sick, or if the wife is pregnant. Stepping over the fireplace is also a taboo.

Getting there

Bus from Chengdu Chengxi station to Wenchuan or catch the Maerkang bus and get off in Taoping

Food

Qiang people like medicinal dishes and special soup that have specific functions for body organs.

Shopping

Qiang women excel at embroidery, and the embroidered wallets, handbags and local costumes make ideal souvenirs and gifts.

Accommodation

Guest houses in the village are not difficult to find and you can bargain the fee with the owner.

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Village surrounded by wall

By Milo Lee

History is more than words printed on the pages of glossy textbooks. It is uncovering the unknown of the past, and penning a new chapter every moment. The forefathers of Yundingzhai understood the meaning of history when they built this amazing walled village.

Six hundred years have passed. The land is surrounded by crumbling walls and high grass. But we still have a chance to see history alive once again, to see how time strips all great powers of their glory.



Streets in Yundingzhai are deserted. Most of the young people go out for work.

History

A journey to the past

Yundingzhai is located on Yunding Mountain. It is the most well-preserved ancient castle-like village of Longchang County. Yunding means top of the cloud, and zhai means a stronghold. Its stockade walls enclose 16 hectares of village.

The 600-year-old village was founded by the Guo clan, and is today a popular sightseeing spot in Sichuan Province.

With a subtropical monsoon

climate and average 17 °C temperature, Yundingzhai has four very distinct seasons and a longer than average summer. It is a comfortable, quick getaway from the big city.

By the end of Yuan Dynasty, years of war had left the earth in Sichuan Province barren and its population decimated. The Emperor of the succeeding Ming Dynasty called for immigration to fill the void. In 1371, Guo

Mengsi, the descendant of the King of Fenyang from Tang Dynasty, followed the order and took his family to Sichuan.

After days of trekking across the mountains, Guo Mengsi stopped to rest for a while. But when he put down all his belongings, the basket in which he carried his clothes tumbled down the mountain. He decided the mountain was a perfect spot to start his new life. He built

houses and plowed farmlands on the spot, and so Yundingzhai began to prosper.

After 29 generations of effort, the Guo clan became a distinguished family in Yunding. Over 600 years and three dynasties, they expanded their power 20 kilometers south of Yunding County. Inside the village, soldiers and food were plentiful and it also had schools, theaters and shops.



The entrance to the village.

Architecture

Solitude village

Back in its golden age, this rectangular construction was practically a small country. There are four forts on the walls and every fort has many cannons, which repelled intruders to keep the village safe.

Houses on both sides of the street were built with soil and wood. After years of abrasion, they look antique and solemn.

In the village, there is a small pond called Ruyi Chi. Alongside the green water, people can see the old people fishing leisurely and kingfishers perched on branches over the pond as if posing for a traditional painting.

Halfway down the main street is Yunding Temple. Although it is not very large, the smoke of burning incense makes it clear that it remains sacred to the villagers and very active.

Lichen is all over the ancient blue stone roads, the walls are lonely and the broken crenels stare blankly at the quiet courtyards. Only a few people walk with baskets on their backs, kids study in the giant houses and shopkeepers sit behind their counters looking bored.

Peaceful. That is the first

Today

A living museum

word people come up with when they describe this small village. New life is just on the other side of the mountain, yet time does not pass here.

Today, only the majestic buildings and vast green lands tell the story of how powerful this village once was. Many wonder why the once mighty

country-like village fell. Some say the Guo family used up its wealth, others say it was the destiny of all feudal lords.

Whatever the reason, Yundingzhai is no longer a stronghold. It is a living history book that opens from the first glance at the village's broken walls and desolate villagers.

Custom

Mid-night ghost

Outside Yundingzhai, half a kilometer away and connected by horse tracks, a two-street zone called Yunding Ghost Market lies halfway up the mountain beside 60 Qing houses. Few people can be seen on the streets, only a bunch of customers who sit in the tea houses and smoke.

But early in the morning, the village springs to life. A line of torches will appear in the middle of the mountain as people sneak up with baskets of wares begging to be bartered away.

Trading in this Ghost market lasts an hour. It is also called the Robber's Market, because from a distance it looks like a group of people, torches in hand, are trying to rob the place.



Local dwelling

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Getting there

Yundingzhai lies about 20 kilometers from Longchang County in central Sichuan Province. The Cheng-Yu Railway and Cheng-Yu highway offer convenient access to and from Chengdu. Tourists can ride a shuttle bus from the Hehuachi bus station. Buses depart every 20 minutes from 7:20 am to 6 pm. Minibuses and buses depart from Longchang bus station to Yundingzhai every 30 minutes from 6 am to 5:40 pm. The total bus fee should be about 100 yuan.

Accommodations

Vacation villas and Farmhouse hotels are priced 20 - 50 yuan including room and board.

Liangjia Xiaodian: A very homey inn that serves Sichuan cuisine for 70 yuan per day.

Food

Most of the farmhouse hotels serve authentic Sichuan food, and there are many restaurants in Yundingzhai, which provide all kinds of local dishes and snacks.